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## Cultural Meaning of News. A Text Reader

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# Cultural Meaning of News. A Text-Reader (Berkowitz, Daniel A. (ed.) (2011))

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When reviewing a text for a course, I often stop and make sure to read the preface, prologue, or other material before the first chapter for thoughts, ideas, and motivations of authors. This allows me some insight into what will make the text work or not work, how ideas will be presented in the text, and whether or not I might ultimately adopt the text for my courses. This is the same process I followed for Daniel Berkowitz's *Cultural Meaning of News. A Text Reader*. The passion and dedication found within the text will make perfect sense after reading these first few pages.

Berkowitz offers three questions that guide the whole of the text: "What is news?"; "Why does news turn out like it does?"; "What does news tell us about the professional culture and the society that produces it?" (p. xi). This is how Berkowitz prepares his readers for the paradigm shift he wants them to take—from journalistic critic to cultural scholar of journalism. Each essay selected (all have been previously published) addresses these questions, allowing the reader to develop her or his own understanding of the particular ideas each author presents as well as applications of those ideas.

In his introduction, Berkowitz sets up the position of the reader for this text:

The cultural scholar sees journalists as people living and working within the culture of a newsroom, a media organization, and a society. And it views the texts that news organizations produce as an artifact of the culture that represents key values and meanings (p. xii).

In so doing, the reader may be challenging her or his own preconceptions of what the journalism student and scholar should hold (exactly the same challenge Berkowitz references in his Acknowledgments), while reminding the reader why he or she picked up this particular volume in the first place —Berkowitz and the authors collected here present different perspectives on what journalism is and why we should study the way "a news story 'is supposed to go'" (p. xii). He explains that a key goal of this text is to help readers, writers, and critics of news consider the cultural meanings of news beyond the story itself. To do so, he offers three frameworks through which to make sense of the news—meant to help organize our own understanding, not "to call for considering news in a multidimensional grid built from a combination of the three frameworks" (p. xii). Rather, the frameworks will aid readers in identifying the foundations of each story; in this way, the reader now has organized models through

which to examine a specific news story or event and gather those ideas for her or himself and others.

Berkowitz continues to present his case for why a cultural perspective on and approach to "news" is an important component for students and researchers alike. Three "vantage points" or dimensions are presented: "Journalistic," "Sociological," and "Cultural." The first two, along with their chronological and epistemological orientations, are compared and contrasted to the latter, furthering Berkowitz's argument as to why the cultural approach needs to be investigated further. This is one area with seminal citation and quotation from within cultural studies, and critical theory would help to support this move further. If there is an argument as to what would substantiate the core position of the text's purpose, this might be it. Having said that, Berkowitz does expand his rationale for the text by bringing in the various ideas (in general) that are oft considered hallmarks of a cultural or critical approach and what differentiates it from more positivistic or social constructionist approaches to "meaning making" (p. xv). Again, though, connecting to the seminal work would help the reader make the same connections that Berkowitz is making.

Berkowitz closes the introduction by presenting a typology to help organize the various research and meaning-making paradigms, the questions often asked through those paradigms, and the ways (methodologies) those questions are addressed. This approach helps situate those various questions and approaches within their appropriate ontologies and epistemologies for both researchers and students. In particular, this approach is quite accessible for students who may be brand new to the idea of research. Berkowitz explains how certain perspectives may or may not align with particular questions. This interconnection of paradigm and method aids in his positioning of the text, in particular its formatting. This is an excellent reference and resource to point out to students of all levels before the text itself is engaged.

The chapters are organized around six "parts": a framework for thinking about the meaning of news, cultural practices of journalism, making meaning in the journalistic interpretive community, repairing the journalistic paradigm, news narratives as cultural text, and news as collective memory. Each unit is comprised of three to four essays selected from various journals within the mass communication, communication studies, psychology, and anthropology disciplines. Before each unit, there is an opening statement by Berkowitz that helps to frame the unit within the larger project. This is common practice for reader collections such as *Cultural Meanings*. What is important to note within these opening statements is, again, the passion and commitment that Berkowitz invests into each element of this text. He makes a point of asking the reader not to see these essays as "the only way" to make sense of the news. Rather, Berkowitz asks the reader to understand these essays as one of several or many ways (both present and absent) to engage "the news." In addition, he ensures that the typology introduced at the beginning of the text is referenced throughout the units. So,

be sure to have students read the introduction. or, at least, be sure to introduce students to the material before they move through the essays.

Berkowitz's closing Epilogue provides a recap of each major element and rationale within the text as a way to answer the opening three questions (particularly the third one) offered in the Introduction. He points out that the text seeks to provide answers to the questions we should be asking about "news" and "journalism," answers that may seem counterintuitive or even, "to the professional culture of journalism ... dissonant or wrong" (p. 368). Berkowitz explains that, "regardless of how you encounter these concepts, the goal is to help think about news from a fresh perspective" (p. 368).

The epilogue then provides a final case study, the 2009 kidnapping and subsequent escape of the New York Times reporter David Rhode among others from Afghanistan. The ethical considerations of whether to report on the kidnapping [NYT chose initially not to, with other news agencies agreeing to the "black out"] are examined via the cultural perspective that Berkowitz has constructed throughout the text. In particular, the example provides evidence supporting why one case can and should be examined through multiple lenses, further supporting Berkowitz's opening thesis. At the end, Berkowitz again reminds the reader, "this book is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of cultural meanings of news" (p. 370). Rather, the text is meant to provide examples of how this lens can and should be integrated into current research trends and professional journalistic practices and consumption: "By doing so, readers can develop a keen eye for analyzing new instances that build a conceptual argument and test out new ideas through encounters with journalists and the news that they produce" (p. 370).

Overall, *Cultural Meanings of News* is a strong and appropriate foray into understanding the meaning-making practices both within and outside the journalistic profession. The typology provided by Berkowitz allows readers to develop a series of lenses and filters to help understand the news culture around them, while the essay selections demonstrate how and why these lenses are important. If this book were adopted, a brief but dense introduction into the ideas of culture, hegemony, power, discourse, text, and the theorists who have been central to developing those ideas would be appropriate while moving through the Introduction to the text. In this way, not only are the tools developed and crafted, but where those tools come from is not lost in the meaning-making for the students and researchers.